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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the instructional development factors that are important in planning magnet schools. Intended to serve as a basic source document for school districts that are considering the development of magnet schools, the paper includes information and examples based on the author's experiences as a curriculum planner in Buffalo (New York). The paper is divided into the following five main sections, corresponding to five planning stages: (1) selection of a direction (adhering to district and state educational goals and maximizing student learning); (2) instructional planning; (3) staffing considerations (choosing a program coordinator and secondary program staff); (4) providing information and developing awareness (sharing the magnet plan with students, teachers, and administrators); and (5) staff training and retraining requirements (linking staff training to district educational goals and focusing on new curricula, materials, methods and organizational implications). A conclusion summarizes the major ideas of the paper and provides a list of the benefits observed in Buffalo magnet schools. (KH)

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A PRACTITIONER'S VIEW OF ESSENTIAL INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT FACTORS IN PLANNING MAGNET SCHOOLS

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Introduction

Magnet schools are characterized by offering attractive specializations in K-12 education with accompanying unique and/or intensified curricula. They provide alternative educational opportunities for students and parents and in most cases, have been the fundamental vehicle for school integration efforts throughout the country.

This paper primarily addresses the instructional development factors that are important in planning magnet schools. In considering the design process for magnet schools, certain considerations for the delivery system or implementation process must also be examined.

The sources of information for the paper are the author's twenty years of experience as a curriculum planner within an urban district that has gained national recognition for sound educational change; the experiences of valued colleagues at home and throughout the country; and observations gleaned from visits to many successful program sites. In addition, the paper includes examples and information from visitors to the Buffalo School District, from as close as Rochester, New York to as far as Alaska, Thailand and Singapore. The purpose of the paper is to provide a basic source document for school districts that are considering the development of magnet schools.

Selection of a Direction

This first phase in planning a magnet school is extremely critical. If carefully crafted, it sets a firm mold upon which subsequent planning can efficiently build.

In selecting a theme, approach and/or program that will become the basis of a viable addition to your education community, it is imperative that, as the Music Man says, "You must know your territory." A magnet school espousing a physical education or sports thrust may meet with greater success in a southern area than it would in Western New York. A school aligned with a major corporation in a town or city has a built-in interest factor. Magnet schools depend on voluntary enrollment, therefore, it is critical to assure that there is a potential clientele for the proposed offering.

The law of supply and demand needs to be observed. Most districts begin by assessing the needs of the community either with an open-ended survey or a checklist survey identifying five or six magnet themes for possible consideration. The demographics of the community are important to consider. For example, our area has a large number of young college and university professors who expressed an immediate interest in a school based on the Montessori approach to learning. Consider the educational philosophies that the community is exposed to through the media or through local social or cultural institutions. The so-called "back to the basics" movement gave rise to a support group for our Traditional Magnet School that included a strict dress code and educational contracts signed by parents, students and school staff. A sure fire magnet school for a first attempt in any district is one for the Gifted and Talented. There is not a district in the country that does not have a core group of parents demanding specialized programs for their bright children.

It is also important to listen to the "squeaky wheels" in the community, to listen to staff within the district, and to listen to the unassuming professor from a local college who comes to you with a beautifully designed program in finance for secondary students. But, in the process of listening, it is also important to thoroughly examine,

and filter through all that you are hearing with the experienced ear of an educational architect. Precise educational foundations must form the core of the selected direction; and, bottom-line questions need to be answered in the affirmative.

1. Does the proposed direction adhere to the educational goals of your district?

2. Is the direction congruent with your local and State Education Department's mandates?

3. And most importantly, will the proposed magnet school provide enhanced educational opportunities designed to maximize student learning?

The tension between community need and sound educational expertise creates the healthy balance that, when nurtured carefully, leads to success. Nurturing this balance is an ongoing process that may have its beginnings here, but must be continued throughout all stages of development and implementation.

A cadre of proponents arises during this beginning phase. These are the people who visit other sites to identify or verify directions. They are the ones who labor in putting together the initial comprehensive proposal for Board of Education approval. They are the visionaries who are convinced that their selection of a direction will truly evolve into a needed educationally-sound magnet program for students.

The composition of this group is peculiar to each endeavor. Generally, it is composed of Board of Education representatives, staff, professional union representatives, parents, university and college staff, members of the broader community, and in some cases, students.

The lead persons in roles vary more often than not. During the development of our Futures Academy, a parent previously antagonistic to the whole magnet approach suddenly became the most outspoken advocate. When this parent became a member of the Futures Magnet Planning Committee and saw the advantages of the life-skills curriculum, she reversed her prior objections to sending her children across town to an inner-city building for their education. She is now an active member of the magnet school team to promote parent participation.

This example illustrates the need at this phase for broad-based collaboration. Plans developed in isolation, albeit by well-meaning central office staff or principals, are too often doomed to failure. The cadre of key supporters becomes not only the prime movers in the planning, but serve as the "cheerleaders" who spread the word and become the catalyst for an ever-expanding group dedicated to participating in all phases of the project.

Instructional Planning

At this point, a direction has been established. Generally, the basic organization decision has been made and you know if you are dealing with: a school within a school; a total school design; an approach that will close a school in June and reopen it in September with a new name, program, and organizational structure; a school based on a curricular emphasis or one based on a specific educational philosophy and/or teaching/learning style; or it might be a unique structure, such as the new school we are building which will be connected physically and programmatically to our local Museum of Science. At this time, you know the breadth of your task and you have your "cheerleaders" as the nucleus of a planning committee. Your planning will be, as Edward Krug (1957) suggests, comprehensive, concrete, cooperative and continuing. Yet when Krug proposed his 4 C's to curriculum planning in the late 50's, I doubt that he had in mind the extent to which each of the above would be stretched to apply to magnet school planning.

The program mission will dictate the key people who need to be added to the planning committee. As Buffalo Public School personnel, it never would have occurred to us that we would be working directly with architects, but our current project makes them critical members of our planning committee. The architects are not there to assist in program planning but to obtain a complete understanding of all program

elements in order to assure that the new building is designed to provide appropriate settings for the multitude of student, staff and community experiences being proposed.

Some projects require direct input into planning from any number of sources that can provide expertise above and beyond local staff planners. For example, our local bar association, elected officials and judges have assisted us in the development of our Law and Government Magnet. Again, most important in all planning committees aside from teachers, administrators, board members, sometimes students, and the experts, are the parents and community members. The general planning committee is usually large, but throughout the planning, small sub-committees branch off and include additional short term members to address specific tasks which, when completed, are brought back to the general committee for discussion and approval. State and federal consultants often provide valuable assistance to the sub-committees. It is important to choose as general committee chairperson, a staff member who is an expeditor, organizer, and mediator; someone who conducts meetings efficiently, maintains a time-line and understands closure. This person additionally will need to be in constant touch with the instructional head in the district - the "master builder/planner". Pick the person, not the job title for this important assignment.

Unlike General Motors, magnet school planners never have the luxury of planning five to ten years in advance for a change in design. Time is always short and intense work is demanded. Local development of curriculum, including activity packets or instructional manuals, is extremely time-consuming. It will probably mean a continuing and costly commitment that will continue even after the opening of the magnet school.

Typically, local-level curriculum development cannot be avoided. A good example is the Air Traffic Control Magnet in Buffalo. There was no curriculum anywhere that we could use or adapt locally. Therefore, work on this project is constant, to assure that all material is sound, sequential, tested and refined as the student group progresses through the initial implementation phase. Local experts have been called upon to assist

curriculum committee members. Curriculum specialists are assigned to committees to expedite the editing and compilation of the materials in a form that facilitates useful implementation by teachers.

In planning many of our magnet schools, we did not have to "reinvent the wheel." Our research and visits to other sites provided us with a very effective method of program planning which we have come to call "creative stealing". Through the National Diffusion Network of Exemplary Programs, and our State Education Department's Transferring Success Program, we have replicated, adopted and/or adapted programs that have proven their worth in other districts throughout the country. Many of these projects have been validated through a stringent review process by the U.S. Department of Education or the State Education Department. The project documents provide objectives, activities, materials and evaluation strategies that have proven effective in increasing learning outcomes for students, and experts can be identified who will come to the district and conduct extensive staff training.

After the initial training, a cadre of local staff members is identified to participate in additional training designed to certify them as turnkey trainers in the program(s). This process assures that the district will develop a local capacity for all future training and technical assistance. We are careful to choose programs that have been successful with students having needs similar to our students, and are congruent with our curricular mandates and local and state testing instruments. Four of our five schools that have won National Recognition Awards for Excellence have replicated national or state validated programs - Early Childhood Center #54, Houghton Academy, West Hertel Academy and our Junior High School Science Magnet. This approach to development also gives rise to staff participation in local, regional and national networks

that provide invaluable contacts and information regarding programs and practices that work.

The replication approach is also extremely cost-effective. The first year of magnet school funding is the most costly and replication of programs rather than local development of all program components, cuts funding needs considerably.

Whether your program development is locally based and/or linked to a replication, special attention must be given to the adaptations necessary to assure effective participation of special education students that are assigned to the magnet. If "mainstreaming" is the goal, curriculum components must be consistent. A task analysis for special education students is helpful in designing appropriate activities geared to meeting program objectives.

Additional attention needs to be given to the activities that the librarian, and the art, music, foreign language, physical education and vocational education teachers will provide for students. Many times a unified aproach to learning is designed in which activities dovetail with the major program thrust. For example, in our bilingual magnets, activities provided by the above staff center around the contributions of the Hispanic culture and are linked to the sequence of learnings provided by the classroom teachers.

An instructional planning committee may become involved with other issues. First, if the magnet is intended to serve a specific student population, such as in Buffalo's City Honors, Visual and Performing Arts and Frederick Law Olmstead Magnets, student eligibility requirements must be clearly defined and recommended. The planning committee often needs to recommend and itemize all the materials, texts, and equipment needed for program implementation. All evaluation strategies designed to monitor program effectiveness need to be included. All aspects for staff training must be planned. The committee also needs to detail any plant changes that might be necessary within the building designated to house the magnet. And finally, an

estimated budget must be formulated and attached to the total planning package for approval by the local Board of Education.

Staffing Considerations

Many magnet schools depart from the traditional school staffing pattern of one teacher per class, assistant principals, and a principal. Each magnet dictates a unique staffing configuration from the teaming of teachers to the addition of paraprofessionals, professionals and/or volunteers. Part of the success of magnet schools is credited to the collaboration and teaming of teachers and aides working together with students in the classrooms.

One of our most successful staffing recommendations was the addition of a "program coordinator" to each elementary magnet school. This person is a teacher whose total responsibilitiy is to assist classroom teachers with implementing all aspects of the new program design. The assistance includes: a) conducting staff development sessions; b) providing classroom demonstrations; c) testing students who enter the magnet school; d) disseminating materials; and e) conducting grade level planning meetings. The program coordinator is in the school full-time, but has no teacher evaluation responsibility. This position has become critical to the maintenance of program fidelity.

In the secondary magnet program, department chairpersons or "secondary program coordinators" assume similar tasks. Many districts with multiple magnets have district-wide teams of counselors and teacher specialists who provide assistance to the schools in reading, mathematics, computer instruction, human relations skills training, and many other services designed to strengthen the total district commitment to magnet school(s) success.

Approaches to staff selection also vary considerably. It is extremely helpful when the principal is designated early in the planning process. His/her participation in

all aspects of program design assures commitment to the project and the development of a leadership role that carries forward into implementation. The principal can play an important role in the selection of the teaching staff. Many magnet schools are staffed through an interview process conducted by the principal and key planning committee members.

To help build staff consensus, some magnet schools require that teaching staff, who are already assigned to a building designated to become a magnet, sign a form stating a commitment to the philosophy, training and implementation components of the new design. Those choosing not to sign are offered voluntary transfers to other schools in the district. In cooperation with other planning committee members, some magnet programs are developed by the teachers who will implement the program.

Because magnet programs demand a departure from what staff and administration are accustomed to providing, a voluntary "buy in" of some kind helps to eliminate the nay-sayers who may impede program implementation. This is also a consideration when assigning professional staff, school clerks, cafeteria and maintenance personnel. The "cheerleaders" expand from the planning committee members to school site implementers.

There is, however, a danger in the development of magnet schools in some districts. Non-magnet school personnel may resent what they believe are unequal distribution of resources, especially during the first year of implementation. Some believe staff and students are being siphoned off, leaving their neighborhood schools with a weakened school climate. Time and information must be given to all schools to assure an understanding of the district-wide commitment to the education of all students and the role that magnet schools provide in inservicing the needs of the total community. When the responsibility for instruction is placed in the office of one leader and not fragmented through a separate chain of command for magnet schools, the divisiveness can be most effectively eliminated. The establishment of separate "turfs" at the top can only add to confusion and conflict. A delicate balance needs to be

maintained and can be best served through one voice articulating and assuring that balance.

Providing Information and Developing Awareness

Advertising strategies and student recruitment procedures will not be extensively reviewed in this paper. However, some basic considerations need to be included here because of their implications for the planning process.

The general planning committee members have the task of providing information regarding the proposed magnet program to not only the board members but also to parents, teachers, the broader community, and sometimes a federal court. As soon as the magnet plan is approved by the local board of education, it is necessary to share it with teachers, administrators and parents. Formal information sessions need to be conducted for each group. These sessions provide staff members with an opportunity to decide upon their eventual participation in the implementation. The sessions will give parents a preliminary understanding of the learning experiences students will receive at the new magnet, as well as information on their eligibility and the educational benefits of participation.

One over-riding concern of parents, at this point, is the safety of their children. Many students, for the first time, will be riding buses to and from a school site that is some distance from home and often to a neighborhood that parents may perceive as undesirable. All safety factors built into the transportation of students need to be clearly defined and emphasized at the information meetings. These factors include: bus routes and time schedules; the assignment of paraprofessional staff to each bus to assist students during the bus ride; procedures at the school site for receiving and boarding students; emergency procedures in case a bus is late or encounters mechanical difficulties; and school policies for the notification of parents if a student should become ill during the school day. Once parents are convinced that the planned

precautions meet their standards for child safety, they are more likely to begin to look objectively at the unique educational opportunities being offered. The "cheerleaders" play an important role as presenters at these preliminary meetings. They are knowledgeable, committed and able to spread their enthusiasm with credibility and trust.

Staff Training and Retraining Requirements

Each new magnet program has built-in demands for staff training. Training programs should primarily focus on the new curricula, materials, methods and organizational implications. Where possible, this training needs to be linked with district-wide professional development goals. Take time to carefully plan every aspect of training. There is a definite correlation between the quality of training and the quality of implementation. Staff need to be freed from all other responsibilities to assure that focus and concentration are directed to the training components. The best time for initial training is during the summer months preceding the opening of a magnet school. Some important considerations in planning training are:

a. Involvement of expert presenters who have proven track records and who have carefully crafted their presentations to meet the needs of their audiences. It is essential that the presenters model effective teaching techniques. Nothing is more deadly than the obsolete lecture, note-taking, and testing approach.

b. Selection and notification of training participants. All teachers and administrators will participate in all training related to the program. Paraprofessionals, school clerks, cafeteria staff, engineering staff, bus drivers and bus aides need to attend specialized training geared to providing program information, developing expectations of their contributions to the school and creating a sense of teamwork.

c. Use of a pleasurable setting. The inclusion of snacks and beverages help convey the attitude that the comfort of the participants is important.

d. Introductions and greetings from the superintendent and board members. A sense of importance and commitment helps build cohesiveness and collegiality among the participants.

e. Dissemination of relevant and meaningful training materials to each participant. Training manuals can provide a continuing reference.

f. Scheduling the first days' activities that are interest-peaking and provide opportunities for successful completion.

g. Provision for opportunities for participants to process new learnings through active participation, hands-on activities and time for discussion and practice.

h. Teaching only a few major topics each day, the modeling of the needed skills and an explanation of their research base. Overload is counterproductive.

i. Matching the length and depth of training to the complexity of program components. It needs to be understood that training will be continuing throughout the implementation phase.

j. Include strategies for follow-up in on-site activities. Recent research conducted by Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (1982) has prompted recognition of the essential need for practice. The on-site program coordinator or department chairperson play a critical role in assuring that information learned in the workshops is transferred into desired practices at the work place. This includes the development of a "peer coaching model" at the building level.

k. Use of appropriate evaluation methods to monitor participant reactions to training, assist in adjusting training to meet emerging needs and help plan for future training.

Staff development has become a primary initiative in most districts. Teacher Centers provide invaluable assistance in this effort. Current research on the "Essential Elements of Effective Instruction" from the work of Madeline Hunter has prompted our district to launch a long-term, comprehensive professional development thrust to improve the skills of all personnel within the district. Magnet schools have taught us that short term curriculum-based inservice is not enough. A commitment to continuing professional renewal is vital.

Summary

Magnet school planning is no easy task. It involves a multitude of steps and processes that vary with each project. Yet, certain common factors seem to be essential to success in all projects. They include:

- Educational integrity of program purpose -- top-quality programs designed to maximize the learning potentials of students.
- Top-level instructional master builder/planner -- maintains the district-wide blueprint for commitment to educational opportunities for all students within the district.
- Action leaders -- creative planners and expeditors dedicated to project planning and implementation.
- Commitment to cooperative, collaborative planning and implementation -- a continuing expansion and nurturing of the "cheerleading teams".
- Constant communication and flow of accurate information to all constituencies -- direct, purposeful and continuous public relations activities.
- Built-in strategies -- for continuing evaluation, refinement, staff development and renewal.
- School-based support personnel and strategies -- to assure that information and skills learned in the workshops are transferred to the workplace.

The benefits to school districts that have incorporated magnet schools as an expansion of their educational opportunities for students are difficult to quantify. Granted, studies have been conducted that verify increases in test scores of students and decreases in absentee and drop-out rates of students attending magnet schools. Yet, very little and in most cases, no data have been generated to verify the ancillary benefits to school districts and communities where magnet schools have proven successful.

A major benefit of magnet schools in Buffalo has been a marked rise in the levels of professional competence of staff members and their continuing demands for increased growth opportunities. Some additional benefits observed in Buffalo are listed below as suggestions for further investigation:

- Increased positive support for the school system from parents, community and media.
- Increased number of national, state and community awards for excellence in education to the district, individual schools and staff members.
- Increased number of visitors to the district who seek advice in planning educational change in their communities.
- Increased requests for staff to act as consultants to other districts in program planning.
- Increased number of parent and community members who participate in magnet planning activities and subsequently continue their education to receive high school diplomas and/or post secondary degrees.
- Increased number of outreach contacts and support networks, including professional, private sector, political, social, and cultural, that contribute to planning and implementation.
- Increased number of volunteers who contribute time, expertise and resources directly to students.
- Increased requests from universities, colleges, private and public organizations for collaboration on projects designed to increase the educational opportunities of district students.
- Increased applications from out-of-district students for admission to magnet schools.
- Increased number of requests for staff to sit on governing boards, advisory boards and committees providing services at a local, state and/or national level.
- Increased property values in neighborhoods that give resident children preference for attendance at specific schools.
- Increased commitment from local, state and national legislators for funding support for magnet schools and education in general.

Participation in a district's magnet school planning and a comprehensive integration planning process can unite the efforts of the total community to focus on educational opportunities for all students, and in so doing, can ensure a self-perpetuating and ever-expanding learning pursuit for all involved.

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